



James Purefoy and Michael Kenneth Williams in *Hap and Leonard*

Turning a series of novels into six taut episodes was the pursuit of the producers of *Hap and Leonard*.

Pulp and Circumstance

"I like challenges that seem way too big and ambitious." So says Jim Mickle of *Hap and Leonard*, the limited series airing now on SundanceTV. Adapted from a series of novels by Joseph R. Lansdale, it follows a pair of unlikely working-class best friends as they attempt to stay on the right side of the law in 1980s East Texas.

Mickle, a writer, director and executive producer on the project, became a fan of Lansdale's quirky characters and small-town settings after seeing the 2002 film adaptation of his genre-defying novella *Bubba Ho-Tep*, set in a nursing home where an aged Elvis Presley meets a man who thinks he's John F. Kennedy.

"Joe understands genres so well," Mickle says. "He's able to combine them in a way that doesn't seem flashy."

With his longtime writing partner Nick Damici, Mickle adapted the author's *Cold in July* into a 2014 feature film. Moving to television for *Hap and Leonard* proved liberating. "We were able to include a lot of the characters' history."

But Mickle and Damici — also an exec producer — didn't have the luxury of time when it came to filming. "I'm used to indie schedules, which are also pretty abbreviated, and this was a fraction of that," Mickle explains. "We shot two episodes every fourteen days, nonstop."

Casting was another challenge, and not only due to the hefty time commitment.

Finding actors to play the odd couple — Hap is a white working-class laborer and draft dodger who's spent time in federal prison, and Leonard is a gay black Vietnam vet with anger issues — was tricky. But after recognizing how the off-screen friendship between longtime buddies Don Johnson and

Sam Shepard had translated to the screen when he cast them in *Cold in July*, Mickle employed a similar strategy with *Hap and Leonard*.

"We cast Michael K. Williams from *Boardwalk Empire* as Leonard first, and he suggested we look at James Purefoy, whom he'd worked with before and had that comfort factor." Purefoy was just wrapping *The Following*, so the timing worked out.

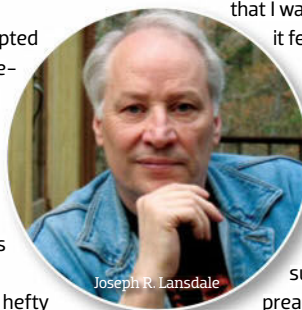
Though Mickle didn't personally know Christina Hendricks, who plays Hap's seductive ex-wife, his sister did. "She is a production designer and worked with Christina on the films *Drive* and *Lost River*. They hit it off and would often dog-sit for each other. My sister put the bug in Christina's ear that I was interested in her for the project. She liked the script because it felt very different than *Mad Men*."

Still, author Lansdale, a coexecutive producer, admits he was "slightly disappointed" that production took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, rather than East Texas, where many of his works are set. But in the end, he says, "there were swamps, alligators, thorns, poisonous plants, insects. It was just like being at home."

While Lansdale's nine novels, two novellas and one collection of stories that feature Hap and Leonard are rife with subtext about racism, classism and sexuality, "Joe's never preachy," Mickle observes.

Lansdale hopes that one message comes across loud and clear through all the wry humor, crackling dialogue, suspense and action: people can have differences, but they don't need to be polarizing.

Adds Mickle: "In a way he makes it a big deal by not making it a big deal." —Michele Shapiro



Joseph R. Lansdale